

Book Review: A Psychosocial Review of L. Mushita's *Chinongwa*

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Book information

Title:	<i>Chinongwa</i>
Author:	L. Mushita
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A psychosocial review of L. Mushita's book: *Chinongwa*

Background and setting

Set in Zimbabwe, the book *Chinongwa* is pedagogical thereby calling upon its readers to reflect, learn, and be taught about the female gender. Showcasing women in their multiple roles, it is also about identity formation and identity maintenance. The author, L. Mushita, makes plain the aspect of togetherness and community, yet still managing to safeguard individuation. *Chinongwa* is about finding one's voice, expressing it, as well as combining that voice with others, in order to make a symphonic sound of the female gender. The book speaks to the psychosocial issue of child marriages that present day Zimbabwe is grappling with. It is a compelling narrative about this hard topic. Additional themes depicted in this book include counselling and therapy spaces, ethnic misunderstanding, spirituality and family dynamics.

The plot begins in 1910, concentrates in the 1920s, spans a good 30 years before concluding in 1940. In *Chinongwa*, Mushita systematically describes the phenomenon of child wives, and the situation of the female gender. If it were a research study, it would fall under the umbrella of a descriptive research design. Typical of a descriptive research design, the book does not dwell on the *why*. Rather, it helps answer the *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* questions regarding the research problem, that is, child marriages.

Keywords: Child marriages, orphan, vulnerable, gender, roles of women, family dysfunction, conflict management, conflict resolution, polygamy, blended family

Characterisation: Different strokes of women

The book has two main characters, namely Chinongwa and Amaiguru.

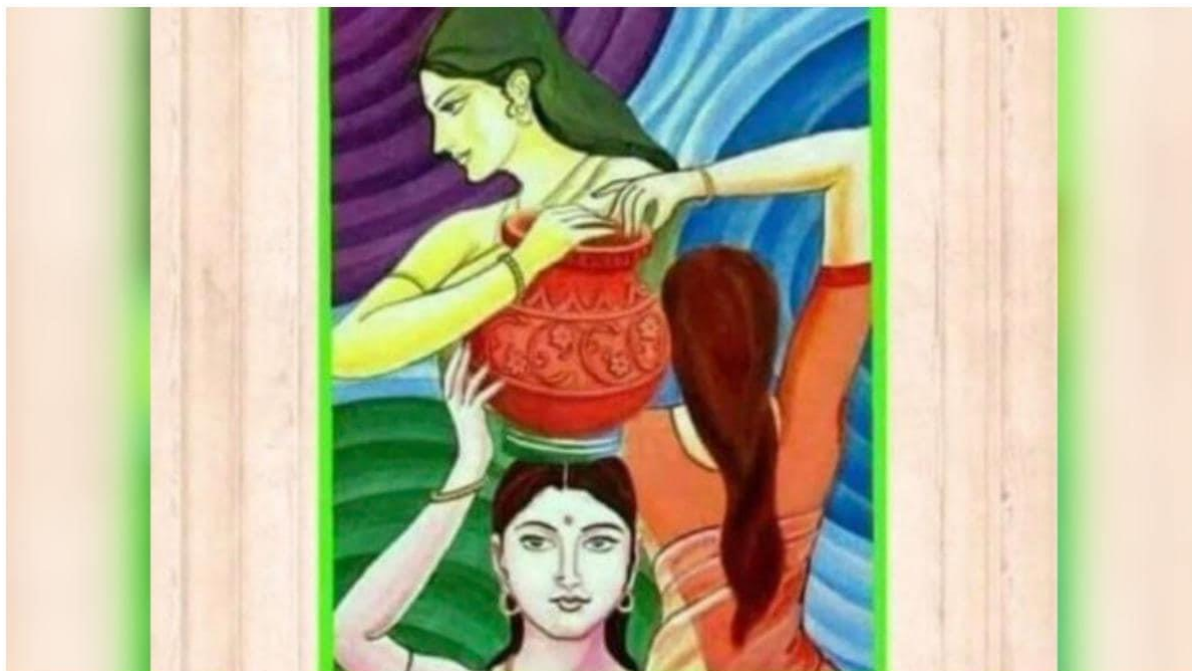
As a child, Chinongwa relates to things in her environment (nature) to language her mind, soul, spirit, essence, being, and inner self. By the age twenty year, Chinongwa has experienced stillbirth, neonatal death, and buried a toddler. She, herself a child, bears and raises children under hostile conditions imposed by her *Vahosi* (her husband's senior wife) and other community players.

In her twenties, Chinongwa is therefore an adult, and a widow back in her village of origin, with a controversial past. Slowly, but steadily she feels liberated in such a way that by age 30, Chinongwa has found her voice and is telling it all! Thus, the book *Chinongwa* helps us to understand and explore the effects of marriage on young girls.

The other major character is Amaiguru (also known as Vahosi, Maidei, or Mai Chitsva). Voices of shame and guilt from events in the past colour and shape her present. She is an adult survivor of childhood trauma. She is haunted by fear, which she carefully and artfully manages. After all, she is the Medicine Man's Wife. She fights for significance, recognition and acknowledgement that befits this position of honour and respect in the community. Nevertheless, as she remains childless, Amaiguru cannot hide the labelling diagnosis of barrenness. So, in a typical biblical *Sarah-helping-God style*, Mai Chitsva acquires Chinongwa to be her husband's co-wife.

Mushita (2022) is artful in her portrayal of the conflict between the two main characters, i.e., Chinongwa and Amaiguru. The author writes in such a way that, if it were about taking sides, the reader would vouch for Chinongwa as she narrates her story. However, as soon as Amaiguru recounts the story from her perspective, the reader cannot help but side with her. Covey (2020) has summarised this tendency as follows: "*We judge ourselves by our intentions, and others by their behaviour*". Commenting about this book, Ngoro (2022), posits that, "*Both characters are achingly human ... where each character has been dealt difficult cards, no one wins.*" In the book, the author therefore advocates the importance of understanding people within their context; how they make sense of their world as they engage with family (of origin, and of choice), engage with community, build friendship, and navigate the manifold aspects of polygamy. Ranging from a whisper to a loud mob, the voice of the community comes through in *Chinongwa*. The results include group think, the community as the commentator, and the community as the instigator.

In the words of the author, “A woman is the central pole of the world, and that means carrying one’s load with pride, at least for the sake of your children” (Mushita, 2022, p.2). The following image succinctly captures the book’s characterisation of women and its thematic concerns.



Source: Nanda S. (2020). Painting. *India Today*, 27 September.

The painting depicts three women carrying the same pot in their own different way. The message is: “Each woman carries her responsibility differently; don’t compare!”

Themes: Psychosocial and mental health issues

The book, *Chinongwa* is an emotional and intellectual rollercoaster, as one would find after reading and navigating matters that have implications on psychosocial and mental health. Themes of the multiple roles of women, the manifold aspects of polygamy, the thin and fragile line between comradery and hostility, gender based violence, conflict management and resolution are part of this work of art. In addition, loss and bereavement, group think, effects of words on emotional trauma, sexual abuse and rape. Furthermore, there are themes of identify crisis, children (orphaned, vulnerable, in difficult places and difficult spaces), and adults who live their lives through their children. Given the foregoing, It is no surprise that clinical themes of anxiety, depression and psychosis also feature in the book.

On the surface, the main conflict of this book is the power struggle between characters as they navigate marriage in its various forms, including one-man-one wife unions, polygamous

unions, and blended family unions. Looking deeper, and going past this conundrum, the main conflict in this book is the personhood of the female gender in Zimbabwe.

The book therefore begs the reader to answer a myriad of questions such as:

- What distinguishes family functionality from family dysfunction?
- What does couple therapy in a multiple union look like?
- What boundaries delineate sex education from sex initiation?

Psychosocial and mental health practitioners in Zimbabwe are often hindered by lack of individual and community buy-in for some well-structured interventions. In a research based in Chiredzi, Gambir and Matsika (2022) pointed out that girls may not take part in programs designed to curb child marriages as they perceived such a move as a direct challenge to their belief system, and/ or disrespect to their elders. These views are in line with Banda and Mutepfa (2019) who argue that the practice of child marriages is deeply entrenched in cultural norms and practices. Hence, in some cases, survivors of child marriages appear to be thwarting efforts towards rehabilitation and community reengagement. Granted culture evolves, yet in some parts of Zimbabwe families have turned a blind eye, as it were, towards the practice of child-brides, child-marriages, and child-wives. Reading *Chinongwa* has the potential to shift perception from *an outsider looking in* to that of *an insider looking around*. These are the sort of stories that existed or exist in one's genogram.

A shift in the narrative perspective

What makes *Chinongwa* attention-grabbing is that the theme of child marriages is explored from the perspective of those involved in child marriages, not the perspective of policy makers. In addition, the psyche of the perpetrator(s), the inner-self of the victim(s), and the soul of adult survivor of having been a child-wife are all reconnoitred and scrutinised. Written in powerful prose *Chinongwa* achieves a descriptive language of the mind, the will, and the emotions. Psychological practitioners such as Flores (2016) and Wilson and Evans (2017) suggest that the positive use of literature, storytelling and role plays teach social justice and advocacy skills to counselling students. *Chinongwa* proffers many options to educate and inform and thus enabling a therapeutic dialog.

The book, *Chinongwa*, can be useful particularly to those not privy to some Shona traditional and cultural practices, or oral traditions and folklore that passed down such knowledge.

Recommendations and conclusion

This book is a useful resource for mental health practitioners, i.e., mental health first aiders, health education promotion officers, counsellors, clinical social workers, pastoral counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists and practitioners offering counselling to pre- and post-natal clients. In addition, this book can be considered as part of essential text in training programmes such as gender, child marriages, and other marital unions. In a nutshell, *read the book!*

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